

The city of Lincoln was recently featured in the national publication *Parade* magazine. The magazine discussed how Lincoln has warmly welcomed a sizable population of refugees from Iraq. Our community and others throughout America have traditionally welcomed persecuted persons from places of conflict throughout the world, and in recent years, a large number of refugees have been Iraqi religious minorities.

As a representative of these local refugees, and as member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee with special responsibilities in the Middle East and South Asia, I have a particular duty to ensure security, stability, and the protection of fundamental human rights in this volatile part of the world. A growing concern of mine, and of the U.S. government, is the safety of various religious minorities in the Middle East in the wake of recent violence.

Last fall, I invited the U.S. State Department official who oversees relations with Iraq's religious minorities to come to Lincoln and meet with resettled Iraqis here to discuss the grave threat affecting their family members and friends in Iraq. Lincoln is home to a number of affected persons, notably the Yezidis, Kurds, and Baha'is. While this was a constructive and meaningful dialogue, during which many Iraqi-Americans expressed their heartfelt gratitude to the State Department, over the last few weeks, there has been an increase in terrorist attacks on Iraqi Christians that demands new, refocused attention.

One such galling and tragic attack was targeted toward a place of worship, the Our Lady of Deliverance Church in Baghdad. Imagine being in the middle of a worship service, and your church is suddenly stormed by suicide bombers who take hostages before killing half the congregation. This and other recent attacks appear to be the work of violent jihadists in order to intimidate persons of other religions and prompt their exodus from Iraq. The turmoil and fear has led many Christians to flee Iraq. While the Iraqi Christian population was once in the millions, now only about 400,000 remain—but that number may soon fall, as they fear for their lives and families' wellbeing.

As religious tensions continue to flare in Iraq and other places across the Middle East, the region risks losing a leavening influence that has historically been a stabilizing force in cultures and societies. The ancient rites have a right to their homeland and a right to be heard on the essential questions surrounding a just and lasting peace to the Middle East. Political leaders must robustly demonstrate that religious intimidation and persecution has no place in orderly society. In Iraq, a hopeful sign is that the government now has an office for human rights protection that is run by a religious minority.

The success of long-term stabilization of Iraq depends on the ability of the ancient Christian community and other religious minorities to live without fear and once again thrive in their ancestral homeland. Securing order, promoting the rule of law, and providing safety for all Iraqi citizens will be essential measures of that progress.